DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 178 HE 026 858

AUTHOR Kent, Rollin
TITLE What Is Changing in Mexican Public Universities in the Face of Recent Policy Initiatives for Higher Education? ASHE Annual Meeting Paper.
PUB DATE 4 Nov 93
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (18th, Pittsburgh, PA, November 4-10, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Administration; *Educational Change; Educational Policy; Federal Regulation; Financial Support; Foreign Countries; Governance; *Government School Relationship; Higher Education; Institutional Autonomy; *Policy Formation; *Politics of Education; Public Colleges; School Role; Student Evaluation; Trend Analysis; Universities
IDENTIFIERS *ASHE Annual Meeting; *Mexico

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the changes that are emerging in Mexican higher education, focusing especially on the shifting nature of government-university relationships and some of the consequences for management and governance at the establishment level. It provides a brief outline of trends in the recent past, discusses the changes that have developed in government policy toward higher education in the 1990s, and explores how the universities are responding. The most important policies are listed and discussed in reference to the following basic issues pertaining to regulatory relationships: (1) diversification/homogenization of higher education institutions; (2) academic roles and values- teaching and research; (3) institutional autonomy; (4) selection and assessment of students; (5) institutional governance; (6) funding; and (7) evaluation. The report also lists the changes in the dominant relationships and values among basic actors in higher education from the 1970s into the 1990s, including how different types of institutional leadership structures and strengths respond to government policy. (Contains 21 references.) (GLR)

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ED 365 178

ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION
18th Annual Conference
Pittsburgh, Nov. 4-7, 1993

WHAT IS CHANGING IN MEXICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE FACE OF RECENT POLICY INITIATIVES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

Rollin Kent

Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas
CINVESTAV
San Borja 938
Colonia del Valle
México, D.F. 03100
Fax (52-5) 575-0320

HE 026 858

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Texas A&M University
Department of Educational
Administration
College Station, TX 77843
(409) 845-0393

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Pittsburgh Hilton and Towers, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 4-7, 1993. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

1. Introduction

Governmental policy toward higher education in Mexico has gone through important changes over the past four years. During the crisis years of the 1980's the much heard lament was low salaries, restricted governmental funding, and loss of prestige of public universities. Nowadays one hears government officials, university rectors and department heads picking up on the optimistic chant of modernization which stresses raising quality, improving efficiency and above all making education more *relevant* to economic development.

In this paper, I shall look at some of the changes that are emerging in higher education, and I shall focus especially on the shifting nature of government-university relationships and some of its consequences for management and governance at the establishment level. This is a progress report on ongoing research by a group of Mexican sociologists who are monitoring changes in higher education. Rather than a finished product, it is a discussion of some initial findings from several case studies that are currently underway (Kent, Moreno & De Vries 1993; Hernández 1993; Ibarra 1993; Rodríguez 1993; Ruiz 1993). These studies are based on interviews, documentation and institutional statistics, and they are thought of as preparation in the development a more precise framework we need for looking at how academic cultures and relationships change in the face of new governmental policies.

2. A brief outline of trends in the recent past

The basic processes at work in the higher education system in Mexico today must be understood against the backdrop of the changes that took place over the past two decades. We realize now that many of our fairly serious current problems grew out of rapid, unplanned expansion in the 1970's, when enrollment swelled from 200,000 students in 1970 to about one million in 1985. At present a national average of about 15% of the 20 to 24 year age group is enrolled in higher education, albeit in a context of great regional differences within the country itself. In the prosperous 1970's, when the economy was stoked by high world prices for Mexico's petroleum, numerous public and private institutions were created: in 1970 there were 100 institutions, whereas today there are more than 370 institutions in operation. About 75% of enrollment expansion was absorbed by the public universities, some of which grew to unmanageable proportions and became centers of political conflict. This development affected their public image, undoubtedly contributing to the growth of the private sector in recent years (Kent, 1992; 1993). One important corollary of this growth was the improvised hiring of young academics needed to teach the growing numbers of students enrolled: national figures for academic posts went from under 20,000 in 1970 to about 100,000 in the mid-1980's. Since the postgraduate level was very small at that time, many of the people hired as university teachers lacked high level training. Another crucial element to be considered here is that as university organizations were subjected to extreme pressures of rapid growth

and politicization, they mostly reacted with the traditionally unprofessional administrative cultures at their disposal, resulting in top-heavy, inefficient and politically fragmented bureaucratic structures and a low capacity to follow coherent development strategies (Brunner 1991; Kent, 1990; Schwartzman 1993).

The crisis years of the 1980's -- the so-called *lost decade* in Latin American economic development -- brought to the surface some of the contradictions inherent in this process of unregulated expansion. The economic crisis and the government policies aimed at opening the economy and restricting the role of the public sector meant that funding for universities between 1983 and 1989 was severely restricted. Additionally, high inflation in the 1980's whittled away at academic salaries, reducing their real purchasing power by about 40% on the average. Although universities were not as hard hit as other areas of the public sector, which were actually closed down or sold off, this severe retrenchment had drastic effects on institutional and academic morale: whereas some leading scientists and academics left for greener pastures abroad, the majority of Mexican professors were forced into finding additional employment, and several institutions went into downward spirals of factionalist struggle over decreasing resources. This, evidently, did nothing to offset growing criticism of public universities and to stem the increasing flow of students toward private institutions.

Socially and culturally, the 1980's brought other transformations. First, the growth of student demand for higher education has slowed down (from 10% yearly in the 1970's to about 1% yearly since 1986), and it has become more specific, more employment-oriented, and more diversified by social strata. The inertial quality of student demand in the expansive 1970's, when higher education was seen as an *entitlement*, has given way to the sense of education as an *investment*.

Criticism of massive public universities became common in the 1980's, and enrollments in the private sector expanded accordingly, at about 5% annually since the mid-1980's. This growing preference for private institutions, especially on the part of the upper social strata, has resulted in the privatization of the educational trajectories of economic and political elites: leaders in politics and business today have gone basically to private elementary and secondary schools, to elite private universities and from there perhaps to a US graduate school. With some exceptions, public universities have been pushed off center stage of national public life.

3. Changes in government policy toward higher education in the 1990's

The Salinas administration reached the presidency in 1988 armed with a distinct modernization discourse: continue to diminish import tariffs, reduce government presence in the economy,

dismantle traditional corporativist relationships within the ruling party and the state apparatus, develop infrastructure, and increase foreign investment. This government has also focussed strongly on education at all levels, both by increasing funding in real terms and also by replacing the traditional *incrementalist* stance in educational finance for a *more selective and competitive* outlook. Thus, perhaps the most important element here is the government's intention to restructure its relationship with the educational system, apparently seeking to move from a *demand-led* to an *expenditure-led* approach.

Many measures have been effected in the higher education sector over the past four years. In order to give an orderly presentation of the most important policies, I shall list them in reference to the following basic issues that pertain to changes in the regulatory relationships between government and higher education institutions (Meek, Goedegebuure, Kivinen and Rinne, 1991; Becher and Kogan, 1992):

a. Diversification/ homogenization of higher education institutions
b. Academic roles and values: teaching and research.
c. Institutional autonomy.
d. Selection and assessment of students.
e. Institutional governance
f. Funding
g. Evaluation

a. *Diversification*: The government has made it clear that it considers institutional diversification desirable:

- Eighteen new *Technological Institutes* have been created, some of which offer two year postsecondary training closely linked to regional job markets and in close coordination with local business leaders. The Community College experience in the United States seems to have inspired policymakers in this effort.

b. *Academic roles and values*:

- Development of the teaching function is emphasized through the following programs: productivity grants to individual teachers based on evaluation scores from students and peers; curriculum evaluation and restructuring is being emphasized as a result of on site visits by external peer review committees that were set up in 1991; and a teacher retraining program through the promotion of graduate studies is currently being designed.
- Research has received far greater attention than teaching: funding has increased substantially; there is a lot of rhetoric about developing applied research linked to industry (something that neither Mexican scientists nor businessmen are used to); funding criteria have become increasingly selective with a focus on internationally competitive research projects (Alzati 1991).

c. Institutional autonomy

Since autonomy is a jealously guarded value in public universities and is protected by the Constitution, federal policy makers have been careful not to talk about reducing autonomy. But officials have been quick to point out that they have been able to implement radical top-down curricular reforms in the Technological Institutes, which are directly linked to the federal Secretary of Education (Zedillo 1993), whereas at times they have expressed impatience with the slow response of autonomous universities. In fact, governments at the state level have in some cases adopted an active interventionist posture toward autonomous universities, by pushing the local legislature to change the university statutes even in the face of opposition by professors and students. It would seem then that autonomy is disregarded in certain cases where activist politicians feel strongly about their plans for modernization and where institutional leadership cannot or will not deflect outside intervention.

d. Student selection and assessment

- Discarding the traditional "open-door" admissions policy in most universities, the government has insisted that entrance examinations be applied at all institutions. The College Entrance Examination Board has been hired by several universities to develop these instruments, whereas other institutions have developed their own examinations.
- A series of tests for assessing minimum professional competence in graduates is being studied for certain disciplines and

professions (health professions, engineering, and law, for example) (ANUIES 1993).

e. Governance

Policy makers are using selective funding as an incentive for universities to develop more efficient management and strategic decision making systems based on the use of systematic information. Greater public accountability of the use of funds is also being stressed.

f. Funding

- Government money for higher education has increased considerably over the past three years, but the *incrementalist* and *benevolent* funding formula was dropped in the mid-1980's and has been replaced by selective and competitive mechanisms to finance research, innovative programs and individual productivity grants for teachers and researchers (Gago 1992).

- Additionally, public institutions have been urged to expand their income from non-governmental sources by raising their traditionally nominal student fees, selling services and establishing contracts with local industry (Arredondo, 1992).

g. Evaluation

The government has set up a National Evaluation Commission for Higher Education in order to develop evaluation at the following levels:

- Institutional self-evaluation, which is performed by each establishment according to pre-designed government criteria and is supposed to lead to a mission statement and a development strategy, which in turn is a prerequisite for applying for additional government funds applicable to specific innovations.
- External review of academic programs, which is carried out by several Peer Committees set up by the government. Their mission is to recommend changes to academic departments.
- Individual evaluation of professors and researchers: this is conducted at the department and establishment level and the results are used to administer individual performance grants.
- Evaluation of graduate programs is being performed by the National Council for Science and Technology, a federal agency run by government officials in close consultation with leading scientists. This process is based on performance indicators centered on the research productivity of the department's academics, which are analyzed by peer committees. The results are used to formulate a list of so-called *programs of excellence* which are then eligible for research grants, scholarships and other financial assistance.

4. How are universities responding?

For a higher education system that evolved under a lax regime of political regulation underpinned by a welfare ideology, this series of policies represents a profound change in several respects. They certainly point to a change in the *culture* of the system at the government level. Whether or not cultural changes are actually occurring at the department and the individual operating level of each institution is a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Now I would like to point to a number of changes that are emerging in the relationships between establishments and the government and in institutional governance. The following diagram shows a global map of some of these changes.

CHANGES IN THE DOMINANT RELATIONSHIPS AND VALUES AMONG BASIC ACTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1970's to 1980's	1990's
Rectors as coalition chieftains & power-brokers.	*Rectors* as managers, aided by expert staff, interested in stability, competition for funds & public respect.
Unions mobilized for wage raises & influence	*Leading scientists and academics*: participating in evaluations, funding decisions & development strategies.
Student groups demanding free access & influence.	*Individual students* as clients & investors, interested in jobs.
Political parties mobilized within universities, the only politically liberal zones of an authoritarian political system	*Businessmen & donors*: interested in making decisions & developing projects with universities.
Government as "benevolent" funder & seeker of political stability	*Federal & state governments*: selective funders & guardians of quality and efficiency
Association of Rectors as political buffer for resolving major conflicts & as formal vehicle for legitimizing government plans	*Association of Rectors*: pushing for participation in designing evaluation policies, trying not to lose political influence.
Demand-led expansion: regulation by political relationships and entitlement pressures	**Expenditure-led & evaluation-led policies: regulation by incentives and demonstration of results**

There are new actors and new values on stage whose interaction with some of the actors and cultures of the previous period is not always smooth. Most active in this new context is the government, which has made it clear what direction it wants higher education to move toward. Power shifts at the national level and decreasing legitimacy of universities in the wake of the 1980's crisis have enabled the government to move toward closer regulation of the basic variables of the higher education system. The Undersecretary for Higher Education has asserted that the government has abandoned its old role as a mere *funding agency* and wants to operate now as a *guardian of quality and relevance* (Gago 1992). The old focus on growth and political stability have given way to a new interest in efficiency and evaluation of outcomes. This is not strictly a shift from a political to a market form of regulation, since the federal government is still the major source of funds for higher education. But it is a shift in the direction of increasing government concern with *steering* the system and with the use of various specific policy instruments aimed at meeting particular goals.

It is surprising to some observers of the higher education scene that this change in outlook and government strategy has occupied center stage fairly quickly. The emergence of a new set of issues and policies occurred with the government taking the initiative from the beginning of the 1990's and using financial incentives to soften the establishment of a new form of discourse.

From our study, it would seem that rectors have adopted the ideology of modernization partly because it was costly not to do so and partly because the traditional institutional coalitions -- who express opposition to this new policy -- have lost ground over the recent years. In some cases, this process has endowed the role of rector with newfound powers and forms of influence within his or her own establishment. The figure of *manager* or *entrepreneur* is emerging, as rectors don the clothing of the modernizer. The case studies of four universities mentioned above have shown clearly that institutional leadership has played an important part in the manner in which different universities have responded to the new policies. The institutions being studied[1] have been especially quick to adopt and implement government programs, although each one of them has focussed on different priorities and has followed different routes. The following table shows some of the measures that have been adopted by some universities that stand out as examples of early and -- according to the government -- "successful implementation" of federal programs. Some of them also exemplify important shifts in institutional leadership and ideology, and all of them have received financial assistance from the government in response to the measures they have carried out. They are by no means the only institutions that have experienced this type of changes and are used here only to point to the importance of the role of institutional leadership in policy change. Something else

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[1]. The studies cover the following institutions: the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Mexico City, the University of Puebla, the University of Guadalajara and the University of Sonora. They include two of the largest and one of the leading public universities.

that should be pointed out is that the focus here is on the *most visible* initial products of policy change.

HOW DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP RESPOND TO GOVERNMENT POLICY

Strong Internal Academic Leadership with Government Backing	**Strong Internal Political Leadership with Government Backing**	**External Coalition of Government & Business Leaders vs Weak Internal Leadership**
- Smooth transition to new policies - Clear move towards research university; - Pay increases for high performing academics; - Close links with local business; - Participatory evaluation.	- Conflict: successful confrontation with internal coalition; - Rigorous entrance exam to reduce student numbers; - Increase in student fees - Top-down managerial style - Support for research	- Conflict: local government intervenes to restructure university - More power to administrators - Creates a Board of Trustees - Transforms Faculties into Departments - Reduces union prerogatives, defeats student opposition

One conclusion, then, is that the type of prevailing institutional leadership plays an important role in the way each university is responding to current policies. Unsurprisingly, initiative by the rectors seems to be an important factor. But different directions are taken depending on various ingredients:

- The existence of an organized internal coalition of union officials, student leaders and university politicians may mean strong opposition to these policies, and they do not go away without a fight. A probable outcome of a successful struggle against such opposition is strong managerialist style of governance with feeble collegial elements.

- The existence of a strong and organized academic community within the establishment will mean pressure to moderate managerialism and to develop new policies along collegial lines.

- The absence of a strong academic and/or political community within the university may (or may not) lead external coalitions of business people and politicians to intervene to restructure the university if it is sufficiently important for them. A managerial style is bound to emerge.

Universities whose rectors take the initiative in adopting government policies meet with a positive response in the government and in the local political and business communities, but they may

face internal strife. Thus, it is important to see the higher education system in Mexico as a complex political system whose actors, values and rules of operation are going through important changes. University politics today seems to center more on figures such as rectors, department heads, policy consultants, researchers, businessmen and government officials. Being pushed off to the sidelines are union leaders, student activists, and the *lower clergy* of Mexican academia. In this changing arena, rectors are discovering that the so-called modernization of higher education brings power shifts that enhance their positions. Whether these developments will lead to bettering the quality and the effectiveness of higher education is a question that must be answered by further research on the consequences of these process for the private domains of the department and the classroom.

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